

## **Guji Guji Goes to College: Promoting Critical Literacy in Taiwan**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores an activity designed to promote critical literacy in Taiwan. This activity had 23 college students perform different exercises all stressing the theme of self-identity as presented in a picture book and other learning sources. Data included classroom observations, reflection entries from the researcher-instructor, classroom worksheets and artifacts, students' reflection papers, and follow-up interviews. Luke and Freebody's (1999) four resources model of reading is used to frame the first research question about the implementation of the activity. Grounded theory serves as the analytical method for the second research question, that is, how students reacted critically to this activity. The study found that students assumed various learning roles (e.g., code breakers, text users, text participants, and text critics) during the activity. In addition, students started taking a definite stance toward their lives; four critical stances were identified. Finally, four pedagogical implications are outlined.

**Keywords:** critical literacy, picture books, self-identity, multiple perspectives

### **Introduction**

A significant movement emerged in language education in the 1980s (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004b). Usually referred to as critical literacy, it involves an alternative approach to teaching and curriculum that was influenced by various theoretical orientations such as Marxism, feminism, and postmodern cultural theory (Luke & Woods, 2009). Implicit in this approach is the notion of literacy as a social practice. That is, the aim of language learning is not only to communicate with others but also to develop a critical competence. Learners can question how texts work ideologically (Gee, 2008), scrutinize tensions among competing perspectives (Edelsky, 1999), critique issues that surround us (Green, 2001), and so on. Accordingly, critical literacy implies an ability to read texts in an active fashion in order to enhance understanding of the world. This shift from merely decoding texts to recognizing how systems of meaning and power operate has been drawing increased attention in discussions and research studies, as evidenced by the volumes edited by Fehring and Green (2001) *Critical literacy: A collection of articles from the Australian Literacy Educators' Association* and by Norton

and Toohey (2004a) *Critical pedagogies and language learning*, as well as the special 2012 issue of *Theory into Practice* devoted to critical literacy.

However, most of these studies took place in English-speaking or ESL (English as a second language) contexts (e.g., Morgan, 1997; VanDerPloeg, 2012). Only a few were conducted in EFL (English as a foreign language) countries (e.g., Kaur, 2013; Valdez, 2012); more specifically, empirical research on critical literacy practices in Taiwan is still rare (Huang, 2012, 2013; Ko, 2013). In fact, some research studies (Bickley, 1989; Coleman, 1996) have cast doubt on the feasibility of critical literacy in East Asian countries due to potential cultural resistance. As Ringmar (2001) indicates, EFL students in Asian countries may well have been left out of discussions regarding critical literacy on the assumption that East Asian cultures are mainly characterized by conformism. In order to explore possibilities for the implementation of critical literacy in Asia, specifically Taiwan, the current study involves a critical-literacy activity that used a picture book featuring the issue of self-identity. Unlike other critical literacy studies in Taiwan (Huang, 2011; Ko & Wang, 2013; Wu, 2011) that occurred in reading and/or writing contexts, this activity took place in a reading classroom where listening and speaking were emphasized as well. Finally, two research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How did the instructor implement critical literacy through a picture-book-based activity?
2. How did the students respond critically to various exercises conducted during the activity?

### ***Literature Review***

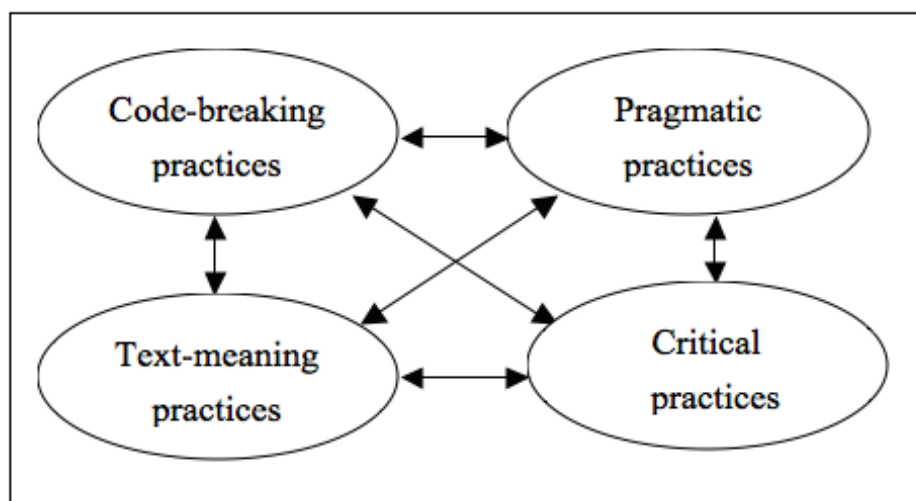
Many language theorists and educators (Henkin, Harmon, Pate, & Moorman, 2012; Norton, 2007) have proposed that in modern times we should examine literacy from a critical perspective. In order to refine the concept of critical literacy, Harste (2009) compares different notions of literacy. First, literacy from a psychological view sees each learner as an individual and emphasizes how learners process linguistic information and how they construct meanings. This concept assumes that the purpose of language learning is not only to understand linguistic codes and symbols, but also to construct meanings that arise from the interplay of author, text, and learner. Second, literacy from a sociological view implies more than the acquisition of discrete cognitive skills. It suggests that the functions and meanings of literacy vary for people with different cultural and social backgrounds. While literacy from a psychological perspective underscores the mental processes by which students make sense of the text, literacy from a sociological viewpoint stresses classroom interactions and students' previous experiences.

However, these two notions of literacy fail to recognize images and taken-for-granted messages implicit in the texts. Not merely a personal event involving isolated language skills, interpreting a text is actually a literacy action "constrained, mediated, shaped by the social forces inherent in a particular community of readers" (Serafini, 2003, February). Becoming literate in the twenty-first century requires developing the ability to understand, analyze, and criticize one's own social milieu. The prerequisite for critical

literacy is to “provide students with opportunities to use their own reality as a basis of literacy” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 151). In the long run, students can gain a better sense of who they are and who they will be—as Pennycook (1994) envisions, critical literacy is a form of “education grounded in a desire to change” (p. 297).

Critical literacy believes that identity is not static but dynamic in nature; each individual may encounter various discourses and demonstrate different identities through daily activities. The fluidity of our identity implies that identity varies with accumulated social experiences. Accordingly, engagement with various texts helps learners not only to make sense of the world outside the classroom but also to gain deeper self-discovery. Critical literacy lies in the assumption that learners are socially positioned by ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc., and that they can construct and be constructed by their own social positioning—multiple identities—through literacy practices. The aforementioned discussion suggests three features of critical literacy. First, literacy should be contextually understood as a social practice. Second, critical literacy sees language development as a form of active being. Third, critical educators should use texts to make students aware of their own identities during the learning process.

In order to foster a knowledge of critical literacy and to encourage its practice, many research and teaching models have been proposed (e.g., Janks, 2000; Shannon, 1995). For example, Luke and Freebody (1999) have constructed a Four Resources Model of Reading. Many studies (e.g., Heffernan & Lewison, 2003; Santoro, 2004) have shown that this model is a useful framework for the practice/analysis of critical literacy. The model divides reading into four social practices: code-breaking, text-meaning, pragmatic, and critical practices; learners then take up four different roles: code breaker, text participant, text user, and text critic. Luke (2000) suggests that this model (Fig. 1) does not imply a “developmental hierarchy whereby one moves from coding to the critical; from the basics to higher order thinking” (p. 454). The model also does not imply a one-way sequence of instruction. Rather, these orientations are not detached from but are connected to one another to varying degrees.



*Figure 1. Interactions among Practices*

Critical literacy places students at the center of inquiry-based instruction. Classroom practices commonly seen in critical literacy include reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, producing countertexts, and so on (Behrman, 2006). In addition, critical literacy recognizes media and popular-culture literacies as two important elements that students should be encouraged to bring into the classroom (King, Hart, & Kozdras, 2007). This approach is influenced by the concept of “multiliteracies” (New London Group, 1996). Critical scholars/educators (e.g., Kress, 2003; M. V. Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013) acknowledge that different text types (e.g., visual, audio, gestural, and spatial) exist and can be used simultaneously to help construct meaning.

To sum up, critical literacy strives to empower students by making them active learners and by teaching them how to read the word and the world. Given that classrooms are sites where different cultural, ideological, and social forms are perpetually contested, critical literacy represents ways of teaching that are both person- and society-oriented, making students able to reflect on, act on, and change their lives.

### ***Methodology***

#### **The context and participants**

The two-week activity discussed in this paper was the first of three activities conducted in an elective English course for undergraduate students at a private university in Taiwan. The course was titled Intermediate English and was offered during the 2012 fall semester. It was designed for all non-English majors at the university excluding first-year students. Twenty-three students (12 males and 11 females) from different departments enrolled in the course. The class met for 3 hours each week. The purpose of the course was to help students improve their English skills, especially their listening, speaking, and reading abilities. During the semester, students were involved in many interactive activities useful for students studying general English. Students experienced different types of input (e.g., English songs, online news articles, and YouTube clips) and explored meaningful messages brought up by pair/class discussions.

The three activities conducted during the entire research project used theme-based picture books. The first activity discussed in the current paper drew on the English version of *Guji Guji*, a picture book written and illustrated by Taiwanese author Chin-Yin Chen (2003). The story centers on a crocodile named Guji Guji. This story constitutes a journey of self-acceptance. Guji Guji is raised from an egg by a Mother Duck, and is threatened by three mean adult crocodiles who question his identity. This picture book was selected for critical discussion (Wilson & Laman, 2007). The instructor considered the story of Guji Guji relevant to students’ lived experiences and useful for prompting students to re-examine topics related to self-identity.

#### **Data collection**

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, I, the researcher-instructor, triangulated various data sources (Merriam, 2009). First, my research assistant took classroom field-notes and video-taped classroom interactions while I instructed the class. The assistant focused on students’ interactions with other classroom participants and their reactions to the activity. When the activity concluded, I held a member-check

with the assistant about the classroom observations mentioned above. Second, I kept reflection entries on students' reactions to the discussed activity; these entries provided useful references for later description of the activity.

Third, during the activity students were required to use English to complete three worksheets and to create a short story, in the writing of which they worked in groups and presented their group's alternative ending for the picture book on a poster. This type of data was used to analyze how students responded critically to the various learning sources offered by the activity. The fourth data source was students' reflection papers, which were completed after the activity and were collected to gather information about how students responded to the activity and about issues of self-identity, instructional materials, etc.

Fifth, 5 male and 5 female students were randomly chosen for interviews one week after they had written their reflection papers. Interview questions were generated from students' responses in their reflection papers. Each student was interviewed individually for approximately 50 minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later analyzed. Both the reflection papers and the interviews were completed in Chinese in order to elicit detailed information about what students thought of the activity. The opinions from students' reflection papers and the interviews were later translated into idiomatic English.

### **Data analysis**

Following Van Sluys et al.'s (2006) example of rigorous analysis, I use two analytical tools in the present study. Luke and Freebody's (1999) four resources model of reading, as discussed above, is employed to frame the first research concern about the implementation of the activity from the perspective of critical literacy. In response to the observations made by some scholars (Comber & Simpson, 2001), a theory-derived model is invoked; at times, critical literacy practices have been described in detailed classroom-based accounts without making explicit their theoretical and methodological approaches, procedures, and data sources.

Grounded theory serves as the data analytical method for the second research concern, that is, how students reacted critically to this activity. Grounded theory is a specific research methodology in which researchers collect numerous data such as observations, interviews, and documents, and then analyze the data inductively. The purpose of grounded theory is to generate theory from data that are derived from the lived experiences of individuals. Based on Strauss and Corbin's (1997) framework of grounded theory, this research explored the data through three coding phases. First, I read through all the data and jotted down notes, comments, and queries for the first time as *open coding*. During this initial phase of coding, I was attentive to any data entries that seemed significant and relevant to the study. The second phase involves *axial coding*, in which I reviewed the same notes recursively and tried to group and refine categories by comparing and examining their relevance. Analysis rather than description was stressed. In the third phase, *selective coding*, the coded conceptual categories were modified and organized into core categories.

The present study uses Luke and Freebody's (1999) model to analyze video-taped classroom observations, field notes, and the researcher's reflection entries for the first research concern. Grounded theory is employed to interpret various data sources (i.e., my reflection entries, students' worksheets and artifacts, students' reflection papers, and follow-up interviews) to clarify the second research question. For the sake of confidentiality, all students are given pseudonyms in their responses to the second research question.

### ***Findings and Interpretation***

#### **From the personal to the social**

In response to the research question "How did the instructor implement critical literacy through a picture-book-based activity?," Luke and Freebody's (1999) model is used as the analytical tool to elucidate relevant data. Incorporating the description of the activity into the interpretative framework, the following analysis suggests that critical literacy proceeded from the personal to the social.

#### ***Session 1 (code breakers and text users)***

The activity began on Thursday of Week 4. During the first session, I conducted an exercise in order to help students foster a critical stance with regard to their self-identity:

- a. Give each student a list of 30 positive and 30 negative personality adjectives (e.g., 'energetic' or 'careless') and give students a quick overview of the list.
- b. Help each student spend 20 minutes to write down three to four adjectives at the top of Worksheet 1 that distinguish him/her from other people.
- c. Allocate 15 minutes to students' sharing their characteristics with their partner and to writing down their partner's description of him/herself at the bottom of Worksheet 1.
- d. Spend 15 minutes having some student pairs share their partner's features with the entire class.

Many interactions between students and myself during this period serve as pieces of evidence indicating that I had facilitated students' code-breaking practices. In the following excerpts for analysis, students' oral responses and presentations in English are given verbatim; the following symbols are used in transcriptions:

I: the researcher-instructor

... : omitted section of discourse

S1: the first identified student

S2: the second identified student

" ": the dialogues on students' poster

[ ]: supplementary notes

One example can be found in Excerpt 1; I helped S1 and S2 to understand the meaning of the word "precocious" by having the pair of students share their ideas on the word and

by offering the entire class one case of being precocious. As Santoro (2004) suggests, many learning activities can develop and support students across two or more of the roles in different ways. This was the case in the aforementioned discussion. When students were required to select some adjectives to describe themselves, they spoke with their partner or me using the words, phrases, and sentences that they had chosen. Students were not only code breakers but also text users. Moreover, using some words describing personality to reflect on themselves stimulated students to foster a critical stance toward self-identity, the very beginning of a self-discovery learning process.

*Excerpt 1: Clarifying the Meaning of the Word "Precocious"*

[I ask S1 for her impression of S2 from their discussion on Worksheet 1.]

S1: She is precocious.

I: Precocious? Why?

S1: Because she knows she has to plan herself about future and save money when she was just in junior high school.

I: I can't catch your words very well. Can you add anything to what she just said? Why do you think you are precocious? We use this word especially when we are talking about a child. Some children are very mature and they do things the way adults do. That's more like being precocious. Why do you think you're precocious?

S2: I think my opinion is more mature.

I: More sophisticated, right? What else?

S2: I know I have to plan for myself.

I: She brought up an issue. When she describes herself as being precocious, she likes to plan ahead. Some young people won't be like her, right? That's "precocious."

***Sessions 2-3 (text participants and text users)***

After completing the warm-up exercise on thinking about 'who I am,' I began the second session with a focus on text-meaning practices. According to my previous teaching experiences with the picture book *Guji Guji*, the story was not difficult for students to

understand, especially with the help of illustrations. I appealed to a source outside the text in order to help students develop a deeper understanding of *Guji Guji* as a springboard for self-discovery. In particular, I read students an excerpt from the Chinese version of the well-known book about philosophy *Sophie's World* (Gaarder, 2007):

*Sophie slung her schoolbag on the floor and put a bowl of cat food out for Sherekan. Then she sat down on a kitchen stool with the mysterious letter in her hand.*

Who are you?

*She had no idea. She was Sophie Amundsen, of course, but who was that? She had not really figured that out—yet.*

*What if she had been given a different name? Anne Knutsen, for instance. Would she then have been someone else? (pp. 4-5)*

This quotation served as a prologue to *Guji Guji* because it was related to the issue of self-identity. Later on, students were encouraged to reflect on the situation that the title character Sophie is encountering. Then I proposed to the students a thought-provoking question: "Would your life be different now if you had a name different from your current name?" I asked students to bear this question in mind during the entire learning process. Afterwards, I briefly introduced students to the picture book and had them complete the following tasks:

- a. Read individually a condensed copy of the story that covered only the first two-thirds of the original version, that is, the part ending with the sentences: "Because we are all crocodiles and crocodiles help each other.' The bad crocodiles grinned again and vanished into the grass" (Chen, 2003, p. 18).
- b. Watch the first two-thirds of an online video of *Guji Guji*. The video clip, in which the actor Robert Guillaume narrates the entire story, can be accessed on the Internet (<http://www.storylineonline.net>). Along with his narration of the story of *Guji Guji*, readers are able to enjoy the illustration with animation and with captions in English.
- c. Guess what might happen in the rest of the story, and write down a possible ending to the story on Worksheet 2.

Session 2 supported text-meaning practices because students were invited to understand the story of *Guji Guji* through different learning sources and students' lived experiences. First, the extract from *Sophie's World*, which prompted some students to ask me about the ideas in it during the break, was intended to stimulate students' curiosity about the relevant issues and to suggest the theme of *Guji Guji*. If the quotation from *Sophie's World* could be compared to an appetizer, the story would be the main dish, the activity. Second, comprehension of the first two-thirds of the story was deepened through textual and audio/visual stimuli. Finally, each student was invited to play the roles of text participant and text user simultaneously. They were encouraged to extend the ideas and storyline presented in *Guji Guji* by individually creating possible endings to the story.

Session 3 began when students were asked to sit in four groups of five-six members. Students had to discuss the different versions of the story suggested by their group members and to come up with a meaningful and/or engaging ending to the story based



on students' discussion and their lived experiences. Then each group needed to write down their main storyline on the poster. At this point, this task made students become mainly text users because (1) they were encouraged to incorporate their imagination and comprehension of the text into the creation of a possible story ending and (2) they presented their ideas on the poster during the fourth session conducted in Week 5.

*Excerpt 2: Helping Group 1's Students Examine their Portrait of Guji Guji*

S3: If we were Guji Guji, we would take revenge. "Why is God playing a trick on me?" Guji Guji exclaimed. Then Guji Guji ran to his Mother Duck with panic and asked her.

S4: "What am I on earth?" Guji Guji said while crying. "My sweet heart, no matter what you are, I'll always love you forever." Answered Mother Duck. "Are you shitting me? You haven't answered me yet." Guji Guji said angrily and opened his pointed teeth and swallowed Mother Duck like Beijing Duck. [Laughing]

S5: Three ducklings ran away and hid somewhere. Crayon hid in a straw hut, but Guji Guji blew it. Zebra hid in a wooden house. However, Guji Guji still destroyed with one blow. Finally, Crayon and Zebra ran to moonlight's house, a building made of bricks and concrete.

S6: Guji Guji tried to blow the house one, two even three times, still out of work, but the fourth time, final time, he got it! Guji Guji ate all of them and left nothing. "This is not KFC!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" [Saying in an exaggerating tone] . . .

I: How about this word? Do you know this word? Did you notice this word "shit"? [I point to Group 1's poster.] I'm not sure that this is correct grammar. Why do you want to use this word? Would you like to share your idea with your lovely classmates?

S7: We wanna express the emotion of Guji Guji. He is very angry.

I: Okay, Guji Guji was very angry. In the mid of the story, did you see that Guji Guji had an argument with Mother Duck and later he swallowed Mother Duck.

***Sessions 4-5 (text users and text participants)***

Session 4 was mostly occupied with students' group poster presentations of their story. As shown in Excerpt 2, Group 1's students became text users when they worked together to create a new story ending. As Luke and Freebody (1999) indicate, when students are text users, they are aware of the options and alternatives for using a text to

convey particular meanings effectively. Such pragmatic competence can be found in students' efforts to create a potential story ending as shown in Excerpt 2. While students in Group 1 were presenting their poster to me and their classmates, I asked the Group 1 students why they had added the line "Are you shitting me?" [sic] to their version of the story. Group 1's presentation shows that the students had engaged in text creation because they were able to use the text contextually to portray Guji Guji shouting at Mother Duck after feeling fooled by her—an attempt to subvert the original story. In short, the poster-making exercise helped students develop their pragmatic competence when they were invited to become more aware of the usage of specific words in their story and to use a text for a specific purpose—creating a new story.

Afterwards, I used the remainder of Session 4 (1) to give each student a copy of the last third of the original version of *Guji Guji*, and (2) to show students the last third of the video clip. This task made students become text participants again; students encountered the entire original text for the first time then and again when they were later invited to watch the online clip of the entire story. Session 4 had students become not only text users but also text participants because students in groups created a possible story ending based on their current comprehension of *Guji Guji* and then approached the entire original text through print and non-print sources.

### ***Sessions 5-6 (text critics)***

Critical practices involve a critical analysis of texts from different perspectives and a transformation of these texts through students' new understanding of relevant issues. That is the case with Session 5 in which students in groups discussed the similarities and differences between the original story and their own version of the ending. On one level, the purpose of this exercise, as I said in class, was to have students understand that the meaning of *Guji Guji* was socially constructed. While students in groups drew on the first two-thirds of the story in making sense of the text, students' teamwork helped shape the meaning of the text in the long run. On another level, this comparison-and-contrast task was aimed at leading students to be text critics able to consider the story of Guji Guji from diverse viewpoints.

Before Session 5 ended, each student was required to write down, on his/her own copy of Worksheet 3, the perspectives on the two different versions of *Guji Guji* that students in each group had discussed previously. I attempted to help students approach *Guji Guji* through the different student versions of the story. These literacy practices showed that students became text critics when they produced an alternative reading of the original text and when they were invited to approach various texts through reflective and critical class discussion. In Luke and Freebody's (1999) words, "[Students'] designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned in novel and hybrid ways" (p. 8).

At the beginning of Session 6, I helped each group summarize its discussion. Excerpt 3 shows how Group 4 was led to wrap up their ideas. Group 4 found that their ending was similar to the original version in three aspects: (1) Guji Guji got along well with the duck family; (2) Guji Guji fought against the crocodiles; and (3) Guji Guji finally chose to live with the duck family. With regard to differences, the students in Group 4 reached two points of agreement. First, in their version Guji Guji sought advice from Mother Duck

while in the original text Guji Guji made decisions on his own. Second, Guji Guji and the other ducks in the original story used rocks to attack the crocodiles to protect their family, but Group 4's version had Guji Guji and his duck family playing a trick on the mean crocodiles and eating them at the end.

*Excerpt 3: Comparing the Original and Group 4's Versions of Guji Guji*

S8: I say the similarities. First, Guji Guji chooses to live with his duck family. Second, Guji Guji decides to fight with crocodiles. Third, Guji Guji and his duck family have a good relationship.

I: Okay, first, you say in the two versions of the story, Guji Guji chooses to live with the duck family at the end. What about the second one?

S9: Guji Guji chose to fight with crocodiles.

I: You can use the present tense. In these two versions, Guji Guji decides to fight against three mean evil crocodiles. He decides to take action, right? What about number three?

S10: Guji Guji and his duck family have a good relationship.

I: All along, always, Guji Guji gets along with the duck family. They don't fight and they don't have arguments. What about the differences?

S11: The difference is that our group ducks eats three crocodiles. And Guji Guji didn't discuss with Mother Duck in original.

I: Okay, in the original story, Guji Guji is confused about who he is. But he doesn't turn to Mother Duck for help. But in your story, he does go for help.

S12: Yes. And in the original version, Guji Guji uses the rock to defeat the crocodiles. But we use the pot.

I: [talks to the entire class] In the original story, Guji Guji's weapons are three big rocks. In their story, that's a cooking pot.

During the activity students moved beyond code-breaking and text-meaning practices. Students became text users when they used the original version of *Guji Guji* to create

alternative versions and became text critics when they recognized values embedded in the text through discussions and poster presentations (i.e., critical practices). In conclusion, the activity offered students ample opportunity to interact critically with the instructor and their classmates. Students employed this sort of dialogue as a vehicle to reconsider the story of Guji Guji from multiple perspectives. Second, a series of inquiry-based exercises led students to reflect on messages brought up in the classroom. Finally the activity stimulated students to recognize the issue of self-identity.

### **Making a difference**

With regard to the research question “How did the students respond critically to various exercises conducted during the activity?”, I was most interested in learning whether the concepts students had encountered in the activity had any effect on their lives after they left the classroom. Therefore, data collected within and outside the classroom were repeatedly accessed and clustered into recurring patterns emerging from the perspective of the students themselves. Ultimately, four themes were identified.

#### ***Students examining themselves and using life experiences for reflection***

In their reflection papers, 10 students said that the exercise with Worksheet 1 (What Makes You Different?) led them to examine their personality characteristics and exchange their ideas with their partner. Andy wrote, “It took me a while before I found three adjectives that could best describe myself because examining oneself was not easy.” Mary stated that although students only needed to pick three words, she assessed herself from her own perspective and that of people around her. As a starting point to foster students’ critical consideration of themselves, this exercise invited students to take a snapshot of their self-image.

Students’ ideas presented in Worksheet 1 indicated that all the students except John, a sophomore majoring in accounting, were able to select three adjectives to explain their characteristics. During the interview, John said that he had some difficulty offering an instance as required in Worksheet 1. He had not had much experience in discussing his personality with others in his daily life, so he only had a basic idea of his image from the perspective of others. On reflection, he described this exercise as a new opportunity to examine himself: “This activity involved not only selecting three words but also thinking about myself reflectively.” He continued, “When the teacher read the quotation from *Sophie’s World*, the question *What am I?* lingered in my mind on my way home that day after class.” Such a response indicates that critical literacy is, as McDaniel (2006) suggests, a way of thinking and a way of life.

Pair discussion had students exchange with their partner the idea of who they were from their own perspective, a collaborative exercise that made students rethink their identity and become more conscious of themselves and their partner. During the interview, Donna said that she found that people were different from what she had thought. Originally, she believed that nowadays university students were rarely punctual for their classes; a discussion with a male student helped her refine her perception of modern university students.

Completing Worksheet 1 made students reconsider their different identities by exchanging features and viewpoints. Such a thought-provoking exercise, from individual

to collaborative, helped students know more about how they were different from others. Although some students, when interviewed, said that they initially participated in this literacy practice as if it were conventional learning stressing memorization, later on they became increasingly aware of topics related to real-life situations. In brief, the What Makes You Different exercise made students pay attention to the fact that language in use can position us; students arrived at one of the critical stances, conscious engagement (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008).

### ***Trying out alternate ways of being through individual writing***

When students were required to come up with an ending for each story, they worked individually at the beginning and wrote their ideas on Worksheet 2 (If I Were Guji Guji). Either in their reflection papers or during the interviews, some students indicated that it was not easy to create an ending for the story of Guji Guji. However, students completed this writing assignment in one of two ways.

First, some interviewed students suggested that they had tried to create a story ending by employing (1) their previous reading experience (e.g., reading children's books) or (2) their personal lives. Jenny felt that stories often had a happy ending in order to teach readers some lesson. In her ending to the story, Zebra and Crayon, Guji Guji's brothers, told him that he was a duck who was taken care of by their mother, which, from Jenny's perspective, was "a lesson for children to think positively." On the other hand, Henry's Worksheet 2 indicated that he had had Guji Guji ask a vet about his identity confusion and the vet told Guji Guji that he was obviously a crocodile from a biological viewpoint, "There's no doubt. You are crocodile from head to toe!" During the interview, Henry said that his major was animal science and he had had some internships in a pet hospital, so he applied his personal experience to the ending of the story.

Second, students completed their story ending based on imagination. Some students created an alternative ending for the story. For example, Guji Guji in the story of a student from the Department of Applied Mathematics had a hilarious interaction with some other crocodiles. Instead of being confused by crocodiles in the original text, Guji Guji responded to the three crocodiles when they questioned his identity—"I'm a shark. I can grow [a] strong body, swim fast and beat three idols [idiots]." However, these crocodiles were not frightened by Guji Guji and seemed to be interested in a fight with Guji Guji. For example, the second crocodile asked Guji Guji, "Do you know me? I'm stronger than 藍波 [Rambo in Chinese]. I can kill you by one bist [bite]." Finally, Guji Guji grew timid and said illogically at the end, "Oh, I'm sorry. Just a funny joke. You want coffee or tea?"

Creating possible endings for a meaningful picture book was totally new for students. As Heffernan and Lewison (2009) conclude, such tension can be used as a resource for students to try on new discourses informed by social and cultural structures. Although at first some students were not accustomed to individual writing, they grew aware of other possibilities for story development. During the process students encountered different ways of being when they drew on their prior reading experiences, lived experiences, and imagination.

### ***Disrupting the commonplace by investigating multiple perspectives***

After completing Worksheet 2 individually, students in each group were required to create a collaborative ending for their group poster. Either in Worksheet 2 or during the interview, many students indicated that group work on the story gave them an opportunity to explore multiple perspectives for their poster story. Such a brand-new experience helped students “expand their thinking and discover diverse beliefs, positions, and understandings” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004a, p. 55). This aspect of critical literacy can be found in many groups’ poster creation processes.

If we compare the worksheets of students from Group 2 and their poster, we will find that Group 2 students tried to create an alternative text with three new roles (i.e., a frog, a cat, and a swan). As research journal entries indicated, students in Group 2 started their group discussion by having each student share his/her ideas. After some time in group discussion, the students decided that they should base their story on ideas from two senior students—Tom’s three new roles as mentioned above and Joan’s dialogue between Guji Guji and Mother Duck. Accordingly, during the interview I asked another group member, Rachel, why in their story Guji Guji became so furious that he swallowed his duck brothers and Mother Duck was killed by the three crocodiles. In response to this concern, Rachel elaborated:

*The original version of Guji Guji started with an egg rolling on the ground to the duck family. This scene made me think of orphans raised by other families instead of by their biological parents. This plot can be commonly seen in the prime-time soap operas popular in Taiwan. These TV programs are ridiculous, so I used this plot because I’d like to twist the original version and to turn it into a funny story.*

Approaching a text from different perspectives and expressing various ideas generated by it helped students re-position themselves from passive to active learning roles through constructing alternative discourses. Critical-literacy scholars view language learning as a practice “that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future” (Norton & Toohey, 2004b, p. 1).

The exercise discussed above offered students opportunities to develop critical literacy competence. Motivated to think differently and from multiple perspectives, they became aware that a text can be apprehended not only through the voice of the author but also through different viewpoints generated by the students themselves. Students adopted alternative viewpoints either from characters in the original story or from characters that were not depicted in the original text and were created by students themselves.

### ***Exploring self-identity from a sociocultural and critical aspect***

With regard to the issue of self-identity, I drew students’ attention to the meaning of identity in the context of Taiwan by asking students to relate what they had learned about themselves and/or society in Taiwan. Students articulated their opinions in their reflection papers; they used their learning experiences to engage in dialogue with themselves and with the world. Some students drew on their personal experiences, a text-individual interaction. They indicated that many college students in Taiwan feel confused about their identities and were unsure of the roles that they would play in the

future. As shown in his reflection journal, Dennis expressed a feeling of uncertainty about his current and future life:

*I am majoring in sociology and thinking is an important and necessary tool in my field. However, I'm still confused about my future. I don't know what I can do after I graduate. What I've been learning from my department is demanding and boring. I think my situation is similar to that of Guji Guji. I don't know what I should do at this moment in my life. Perhaps I should talk with my parents or some of my respected professors in school.*

Other students reflected on the self-identity issue through a text-society interaction; they interacted not only with themselves but also with the world. These students responded to this issue from a broader sociocultural viewpoint because they were more conscious of what external factors have an impact on one's self-identity. These factors included social values, mass media, etc. For example, some students mentioned the values and ideologies in society that influence people's thought and behavior. During their interviews, Marilyn and Tom both used "Kang Xi Lai Le" (a TV talk show extremely popular among Taiwanese teenagers) as an example of media shaping self-perception. They both pointed out that the program's discourse might have a negative effect on teenagers, especially on the way they see themselves. As Marilyn emphasized, this TV show keeps advocating the benefits of plastic surgery, which would be likely to distort teenagers' values and make them overly concerned about artificial beauty.

According to Pennycook (2004), critical moments occur as students "seize the chance to do something different... [and] realize that some new understanding is coming about" (p.330). The discussion above shows that students used various opportunities to think differently and act reflectively. Students' lives changed when they: (1) used personal experiences for reflection and re-assessed themselves; (2) experimented with alternative ways of being through creating a new discourse, and (3) addressed the notion of multiple perspectives. Ultimately, students became critically literate when they started questioning their status quo and that of society.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that the implementation of critical literacy among college students in Taiwan is feasible. I had students experience different learning sources (i.e., a picture story book, pair/group discussions, story-ending creating, group poster-making, and so on) and develop their ability to assume different roles, including those of code breaker, text participant, text user, and text critic. Students' responses to the activity inside and outside the classroom suggested that they had assumed four critical stances toward the theme of self-identity. These include: (1) students examining themselves and using life experiences for reflection; (2) trying out alternate ways of being through individual writing; (3) disrupting the commonplace by investigating multiple perspectives; and (4) exploring self-identity in a sociocultural and critical aspect. These findings indicate that this activity led students from a teacher-centered to a student-centered environment, in which they were transformed into thinkers starting to take a stance.

Such a conclusion can dispel doubt about the potential of critical literacy in EFL contexts. In particular, instruction based on critical practices engaged students with diverse types of texts and with one another. Classroom discourse here did not involve

language only. It included social and semiotic practices. In this activity, students selected words, made decisions, expressed opinions, collaborated/negotiated with others, and presented group efforts through language arts. Classroom discourse presented in this study permeated students' thoughts and actions. Therefore, it is necessary for critical researchers and educators to recognize classroom teaching and learning as social practices that inform students' lives.

Because of space constraints, this paper focuses on how the present activity was conducted and how students responded to it. With regard to language development, many students, as suggested from different data, agreed that they developed their four language abilities as well as the ability to think deeply through completing various exercises with a central theme. This activity was quite different from their previous experiences in junior and senior high school, in which language skills were treated in isolation. In addition, as Kim (2004) has found, when students were encouraged to connect their learning with meaningful topics and real-life situations, their comprehension of the texts was enhanced.

At the end of the semester, I asked interviewed students if they would like to participate in another similar class in the future. Some said that they preferred taking a break because they found three activities in one semester somewhat challenging. According to Beck (2005), one difficulty in implementing critical literacy is that such teaching asks students to assume various responsibilities: scrutinizing texts, joining heated discussions, thinking critically, facing controversial issues, sharing personal feelings, and so on. Therefore, I now think that there might have been too many exercises required in the present activity, the first out of three such critical literacy activities. An activity with fewer requirements might be better for students who are not experienced in critical literacy practices.

### ***Pedagogical Implications***

Based on the research findings, this study offers several pedagogical implications for language teachers. First, as indicated previously, the four literacy components in Luke and Freebody's (1999) model are not intended to form a rigid learning sequence, nor are they intended to dominate the classroom one at a time. This study has confirmed this argument. Moreover, these orientations provide teachers with a theoretical framework to observe critical literacy from various viewpoints, and they can also be used as criteria for classroom teaching.

Secondly, as argued by researchers (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), critical literacy practices are grounded in the particular situations of students' lives and in the multiple layers of their identities. Accordingly, teachers should address students' interests in the classroom, through new forms of communication and expression.

Third, approaching a theme-based picture book led students to relate their learning to their lived experiences, so language instruction should not be limited to textbooks only. Students' responses to *Guji Guji* suggest that picture books can be stimulating alternative materials. Students can be active learners comprehending the text by themselves rather than passive learners waiting for the transmission of textbook knowledge from their teacher.



Finally, reading multimodal texts on the same topic is effective in promoting critical literacy. Students in the current activity were not asked only to “read” picture books; they worked through different exercises related to the same issue. This strategy is also called “text sets” (Vasquez, 2003). Text sets means that by having students read and discuss a set of different texts (e.g., print/nonprint material) relevant to a particular theme, genre, or issue, students are able to recognize and respect multiple attitudes. This research confirms the notion of multiliteracies and suggests that we need to expand notions of literacy beyond monologic, print-based texts.

### About the Author

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